DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 221 CE 071 936

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TITLE The Quest for Diversity.
INSTITUTION Literacy Volunteers of America--New York State, Inc., Buffalo.
SPONS AGENCY Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation, Inc., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
JOURNAL CIT Literacy Practitioner; v3 n1 p1-2,6-7

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; Cultural Differences; *Diversity (Institutional); Educational Quality; Institutional Mission; *Job Development; *Literacy Education; Outreach Programs; Program Improvement; School Demography; *Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS Diversity (Faculty)

ABSTRACT

The current promotion of diversity encourages people from assorted backgrounds and mutual goals to find compatible but not necessarily identical ways to work together. Each literacy program will have a different need to expand its circle. It must consider all the characteristics that might widen its constituency, analyze all participants, and be informed about the demographics of its community. Lack of diversity has several causes: no outreach beyond the immediate circle of current participants, volunteers who are not welcoming of newcomers, and fixed community image. For many institutions, becoming truly open to diversity requires a major culture shift. Self-education may be needed. If there is no serious resistance to diversity, attention can be focused on volunteer job design and outreach efforts. A job design that welcomes differences may require more flexibility in scheduling times and sites and rethinking of some services the organization provides. Active outreach involves directly asking people in the target audience to join the literacy effort, approaching recruitment as a search for talented individuals who meet real needs and match the desired demographic profile, recruiting in new places, and redesigning materials to reflect a wish for diversity. The organization can avoid tokenism and help newcomers by acknowledging the new volunteer as a pioneer, recruiting several new volunteers together, mixing newcomers and veterans, and using a buddy system. (YLB)

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ED 397 221

Literacy Practitioner

Volunteer Management Issue

A Publication of Literacy Volunteers of America — New York State, Inc.

Vol. 3, No. 1
March, 1996

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

The Quest For Diversity

Susan J. Ellis
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Most organizations today want to reflect the diversity of their communities. In some cases, however, they are battling a tradition of orientation to one race, one gender, one age group, or one social class. It is as difficult to introduce diversity into a volunteer program after the fact as it is to do so in any other aspect of our society, but it can be done.

The simplest definition of "diversity" as used by literacy programs is that participants have a wide range of demographic characteristics. However, in common usage, "diversity" has come to imply racial or ethnic integration. Ironically, the use of the word diversity has increased as the concept of "integration" has lost popularity. Integration has come to mean a blending of characteristics, inviting people from varied backgrounds to work together in similar ways toward common goals. For some, this approach has the danger of loss of identity to the stronger group. Instead, the current promotion of "diversity" encourages people from assorted backgrounds and mutual goals to find compatible but not necessarily identical ways to work together.

What this means is that if you sincerely want to open your doors to many types of people, you have to be willing to adapt. Diversity is not achieved if you are doing business as usual, and your participants only "look" different. True diversity includes being open to optional ways of conducting business.

What Does Diversity Mean to You?

Despite the frequent use of the word diversity to mean multi-racial representation, each literacy program will have a different need to expand its circle. Consider all the characteristics that might widen who your various constituents are - race, gender, age, ethnic or national background, language spoken, income level, education, professions or job settings, community power and influence, political leanings, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, physical disabilities, geography: where people live or work, degree of personal experience with your issue, having ever been a client, having ever been a donor or funder, skills, years with the organization.

Analyze your paid staff, students, and current volunteers and donors. After you have analyzed who your participants are now, ask: Is this the diversity we want or need?

It is also important to be informed about the demographics of your community. Who lives in your town? What is the mix of ages, races, ethnic backgrounds? Then you can ask: Are we representative of the local population? Are the employees and volunteers representative of the students we serve?

Be careful not to misuse the word "minority." Like the word diversity, minority has a dictionary and a popular definition. Its denotation is purely numerical: a minority is less than half of a group. But its connotation involves a comparison to who is in power: minorities are those who are different from those who control a group, an agency, a government. This is why women, who make up more than 50% of the United States population, are considered an underrepresented constituency. Who is in the minority (or majority) and who will "diversify" your organization are relative issues.

Causes of Lack of Diversity

There are many reasons why organizations are homogeneous, but most evolve into "sameness" over time. And then the hard part is changing the culture and recruiting different types of people once a tradition has been set.

As with other issues, you need to diagnose why there is a lack of diversity in your group. Some possibilities:

- For a long time there has been no outreach to anyone other than the immediate circle of current participants. In other words, no one different has been asked to join.
- The desire for diversity has been publicized, but the deck is stacked. Some organizations make it very difficult for someone to participate unless that person can comply with many peripheral requirements. For example, if all training sessions are held on weekday mornings, it may be hard to recruit people who are at a job at that time. This reinforces the message that only retired people need apply.
- The paid staff (and maybe the board) is homogeneous and prospective volunteers can see that money and authority are not being truly shared even though an effort is made to recruit different types of frontline volunteers.

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- Current volunteers are not at all welcoming of newcomers, especially if they are different in some way. Only a few leaders are pushing for diversity; the general membership undercuts the process.
- Your image in the community is so fixed that most people assume you want the volunteers you have and aren't really looking for other types of volunteers. They are surprised at your new recruitment outreach.
- The few "different" volunteers you have had in the past were tokens of your political correctness. They felt isolated and merely tolerated. This type of experience is not conducive to people asking their friends to join.
- The way that your organization has articulated its mission, defined community problems, or developed services is rooted in one—perhaps limited or ethnocentric—perspective. People with different perspectives (and alternate solutions) therefore do not feel mutual ownership of your work.

These are quite serious issues. Ultimately, it is foolish to consider diversity a "recruitment" problem if it is really an institutional prejudice problem. So you must address the root causes first.

It is this type of resistance to change that has led corporate America into workshops on human relations, multicultural diversity, and dealing with change. For many institutions, becoming truly open to diversity requires a major culture shift. If this is true of your organization, you may also have to begin with self-education before trying to recruit new volunteers. Otherwise, your recruitment efforts will be useless — the new volunteers will feel unwelcome or will recognize that they are tokens, and they'll leave.

You cannot transform the prejudices of every individual nor make each person warm and loving. But you can work toward removing barriers of rules and procedures, and you can support those participants who sincerely want to welcome a much more varied pool of volunteers.

"For many institutions, becoming truly open to diversity requires a major culture shift."

It is certainly possible that there is no serious resistance to diversity lurking in your organization. In that case, you can focus your attention on the two subjects most important to successful recruitment: volunteer job design and outreach efforts.

Job Design That Welcomes Difference

As already implied, some organizations have unconsciously limited their appeal to a wider range of volunteers by their work traditions. Examine what you are asking volunteers to do and candidly assess if the tasks themselves have limited appeal. What might be the feel and tone of the title "tutor" to different populations? The very structure of how things get done can send a message of exclusion: the time meetings are held, the expectation of having a car or tools like a computer, the way people dress.

Examine these and other assumptions about volunteer work in your affiliate. Which factors cannot be changed because they are the most effective in accomplishing goals? Which are irrelevant to productivity and simply evolved over the years because past volunteers were comfortable this way? Are there other ways of doing things that might also work?

Do not presuppose that you have to make changes to diversify! This may actually be a negative stereotype. If you hope to attract more African-Americans, for example, it is insulting to act as if this group of citizens are all low income or undereducated. A teacher or lawyer who happens to be black will be able to handle the same type of volunteer job description as any other teacher or lawyer regardless of race. There may be other issues that make the African-American volunteer feel welcome or not, but the work design may be fine.

On the other hand, to attract some new groups you may well have to be more flexible. Unless you hold orientations in the evening, most day-time employees will be shut out of volunteering with you. Unless you let college students change schedules each semester as their courses shift, you will lose them every three months. Unless you stop expecting committee chairpeople to host meetings in their homes (and provide refreshments), you may not draw working women to your cause. Conversely, selecting a neighborhood site for a training workshop demonstrates your interest in working with residents from that area.

Reaching out to new communities may require re-thinking some of the services your organization provides. Diverse volunteers may not agree with all of the methods used and may, in fact, have better ideas for how to solve problems. For example, the basic one-tutor-to-one-student model may be challenged if new Asian-Americans feel uncomfortable with such an intimate arrangement and would prefer a group setting. Is it feasible for you to consider making changes or to add (or at least test) alternative options? The answer to this question may be at the heart of your ability to attract new types of people to be volunteers.

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Literacy Practitioner is a publication of Literacy Volunteers of America - New York State

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Design/Printing by Graphics Plus Printing, Inc., Cortland, NY
Publication made possible by a grant from The Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation

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Recruiting Through Current Volunteers

Using your current volunteers to attract new ones makes sense, but this process does not necessarily happen naturally. Give volunteers tools with which to spread the word, such as extra program brochures. Or you might consider printing a special piece for members to give their friends that begins with something like: "You may have wondered about my volunteer work for literacy ...let me tell you more..." Some quick training in how to recruit might be helpful, too.

One important caution: do not rely on current volunteers to bring in more diversity. People tend mainly to know people who look and think like themselves and so will recruit other volunteers who are like themselves. So if you want to expand your circle to include different ages, races, or parts of the community, you will need a different approach. You will need to solicit volunteers from among people none of you may already know.

"Approach recruitment as a search for talented individuals who meet real needs in your organization but, as an added bonus, also match your desired demographic profile."

Do Active Outreach

Any public perception of your volunteer program as being closed to outsiders requires a vigorous campaign to counteract. As simple as it sounds, the key is to make sure you are directly asking people in your target audience to join your literacy effort—not assuming they hear the same message as everyone else.

In your recruiting, never look for "some Asians" or "some teenagers with disabilities." That would be unconscionably bigoted. Why? Because seeking people only for their demographic data means that you care more about what they are on paper than about what they can contribute as volunteers. Instead, approach recruitment as a search for talented individuals who meet real needs in your organization but, as an added bonus, also match your desired demographic profile.

For example, if you often find tutors through branch libraries or bookstores, and now want to focus on recruiting Hispanic and Latino volunteers, brainstorm which libraries and bookstores have a better-than-even chance of serving a bilingual population and then focus your recruitment efforts at those sites. (Note that I cannot assume that everyone who is ethnically Latino/Hispanic speaks Spanish, nor that everyone who speaks Spanish also speaks enough English to be a successful volunteer.) The goal is to place yourself where the majority of the audience receiving your recruitment message fits the demographic profile you are seeking.

The good news is that you may be able to use the exact same recruitment methods and materials already developed, but in new places. If your bulletin board poster seeking tutors is hanging in the Native American Recreation Center, your desire to recruit Native Americans is strongly implied. Similarly, giving a speech to supporters of the United Negro College Fund or to the AIDS Self-Help Group carries the subtext of "we want you."

For other sources, however, you may need to redesign your materials to reflect your wish for diversity. Make sure photographs and slides show different ages, races, both sexes, etc. Bright colors may attract teenagers; more subdued colors may be more effective in reaching corporate executives. If and how you adapt will depend on whom you want to reach.

Get Help

If you are beginning a serious affirmative action campaign to recruit a larger number of new volunteers, it may be extremely helpful to start by recruiting some advisors. Establish an Outreach Team or Diversity Task Force to generate recruiting ideas. Be honest about the changes you want to make in the volunteer corps. The desire for diversity will not come as a surprise to most people — but they may well need to be convinced of your sincerity. Tokenism will quickly be spotted. Real change will be supported.

While no one member of your Diversity Task Force can speak for her whole race, gender, or ethnic group, these volunteers can provide you with useful insights into what might turn candidates on or off to your organization. They certainly can give their perspectives on the questions of image and can help in brainstorming where to look for volunteers. Task force members can also open doors to new contacts and recruitment sources.

Another suggestion is to familiarize yourself with local publications that have audiences in various racial or ethnic

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communities. Not only will this increase your understanding of issues important to other groups, but you will undoubtedly find many leads useful in recruitment.

If you plan to recruit with foreign language materials, make certain these are written and reviewed by someone with a speaker's knowledge of this language—not a scholar's. Colloquialisms, tone, and double meanings need to be spotted (or used) or you run the risk of insulting prospective volunteers. Better to recruit in English rather than using a foreign language poorly.

More Outreach Ideas

Each ethnic community is different. The more you understand about the group you wish to attract, the better able you will be to frame an appealing message. It is also important to know which messages or community leaders have influence in certain neighborhoods and where the centers of activity are.

Here are a few tips:

- There are differences among the generation that was born elsewhere and immigrated here, and the first generation to be born here, and their children. Ethnic identity, bilingualism, and other national ties may weaken as generations assimilate.
- Never assume that racial or ethnic differences mean low income.
- Never assume that difficulty with English means lack of education or skills.
- Don't recruit in a foreign language unless the volunteer can work for you using that language. You are being misleading if you put out flyers in Korean but then expect all volunteers to speak English.
- If you are actively recruiting foreign-speaking volunteers, have staff who can handle non-English telephone calls.

Avoid Tokenism and Help Newcomers

Recognize that the first person to expand your group may feel a bit uncomfortable. Level with him or her about your sincere wish to increase the number of males, or teenagers, or African-Americans, and acknowledge that this new volunteer is a pioneer. If possible, recruit two or three new volunteers together and acknowledge that they are part of an outreach project. Let the newcomers be a support system for one another and advisors to you. Once they are working happily as volunteers, enlist their help in recruiting others.

One form of tokenism is to elevate the first "different" volunteer to the position of officer or leader without having earned that privilege. People know when they are asked to assume visible leadership roles as window dressing, rather than as recognition for real contributions made. Of course, you should also avoid the opposite extreme: maintaining the Old Guard in leadership roles long after new volunteers have done their time "in the trenches."

Because so many people volunteer for social as well as philanthropic reasons, try to mix newcomers and veterans in such a way as to get them better acquainted. Arrange some informal interaction time, even if it is only over a pre-work cup of coffee. Take care to introduce people with more than their names; share some information about each to get conversation started. If possible, send two volunteers out together to deliver or pick up something, providing the chance to talk more personally.

A buddy system is an excellent approach to team building, providing there are clear tasks for the buddies to do together. Enlist veteran volunteers as orientation leaders and trainers. But also design group exercises that show the skills the newly-recruited volunteers bring to the organization.

In the last analysis, you cannot expect all volunteers to become friends. But you can expect people to work together to accomplish mutual goals. People of different backgrounds may initially be uncomfortable if they feel unfamiliar with each other. But you will also find that volunteers enjoy getting to know people they would not typically encounter in their daily routine. Start with what they already share in common: having said yes to becoming a volunteer in support of the same organization! The rest will come with cooperation and time. ■

This article is adapted from THE VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT BOOK by Susan J. Ellis, copyright 1994, Energize, Inc.

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THE VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT BOOK is available through the LVA catalog (315-445-8000) or directly from ENERGIZE. For a free copy of the company's 1995-1996 "Volunteer Energy Resource Catalog," call 1-800-395-9800 or write to ENERGIZE, Inc., 5450 Wissahickon Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144.

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